

John Dix

Fire Gambler

Words and photos (except where noted) by Ry Beville

John Dix emerges from his humble lodgings at the Mendocino Arts Center in Northern California dressed rather casually for a 'sensei' about to give a presentation later that morning. Then again, the combo of a T-shirt and comfortable pants tends to be the look among many of Japan's ceramic artists. It's a reflection of their work, which often stresses function as much as fashion. Dix looks none the worse for the previous night's activities, either. Roughly a dozen advanced ceramic artists who had enrolled in Dix's workshop here traded shifts deep into the night to continue feeding the two wood-fired kilns at the center. People brought food and



Above and left: Dix removing newly fired ceramics from the kiln at the Mendocino Arts Center



Pieces left behind at the Mendocino Arts Center by potters of the past

drinks for the occasion and the evening became festive.

We sit in some weathered wooden chairs in the outdoor kiln area as dense fog moves through the crowns of towering evergreens along the property. This rugged part of the coast of Northern California seems like an appropriate place for the hard work required of wood-fired kilns. The two kilns that the group fired are dying down while still very much working on the ceramics inside through heat and ash. Several tables have been cleared for when they plan to pull the pieces from the kiln the next day, some of those works from Dix himself. He's a veteran ceramicist based in the hamlet of Ōgami, Hyogo Prefecture who practices pottery influenced by Japanese traditions. He's also perhaps the only ceramic artist in Japan of any stature consciously creating ceramic cups intended for whisky.

While Japan's whisky legacy dates back decades, its tea and sake traditions have existed for hundreds of years. In the case of the latter, the earliest extant literature details its use as a part of rituals. Archeologists have found evidence of consumption in the pottery of Jōmon era (14,000–300 BCE) hunter-gatherer tribes. Understandably, ceramic practice in Japan has developed around those two beverages in the form of *chawan* (tea bowls), *tokkuri* (flasks), and *guinomi* (sake cups). In the case of chawan, they are often the most prized objects to emerge from kiln firings and artists will place their unfired chawan in the most optimal places of their kilns. Most people drink sake casually, but the tea ceremony is a refined aesthetic practice demanding works of art.

Dix produces these types of ware as well, but when asked why he thought to produce vessels for whisky, he replies, "I

like to drink whisky and tequila. I like a cup a little bigger than a *guinomi*, but something that's smaller than a coffee cup. That's the ideal size. I was making cups of that size and thought they were very ergonomic and interesting. I started calling them whisky cups."

Those familiar with Japanese ceramics might ask how these are different from *yunomi* (palm-sized cups for tea, coffee, or alcoholic beverages like *shōchū* or *umeshu*). Dix is quick to assert that his whisky cups are smaller but does point out that the boundaries of ceramic vessel classifications are blurred anyway. As an example, he notes that sake cups in the Kumano tradition, centered in Fukuyama City, Hiroshima Prefecture, are larger than others. Of course, there is more to a cup than its size; the shape, glazes, and other characteristics might influence whether we perceive something as better suiting tea



Dix and ceramicist/instructor Ian Hazard-Bill



that stuck together in the kiln; first step, water immersion



Students studying works removed from the kiln

or whisky. The artist may, in imagining what a cup will be used for, shape it or fire it to achieve a desired effect that conforms with his or her vision.

"When you make things for drinking alcohol, it creates... not a sense of ceremony, but a different mindset for the people using it. That drew me to this style. Originally, they were for my own personal utilitarian use, but I thought it would be a good thing to market. It would be 'my' thing. I've since made

whisky cups for almost every firing."

Dix says he started firing whisky cups in Japan in the late 1990s. He originally had one kiln, which he says he fired three times a year. He later built a smaller kiln as an addition. He typically fires the large one twice a year and the smaller one two or three times. When asked how many whisky cups he puts in the kiln with each firing, he says "maybe twenty". You can do the math; there aren't that many of his whisky cups out

there in the world. You'd be fortunate to have one from the pioneer of this contemporary style.

"Whisky cups are such niche things," says Dix. "But if I get on a roll and really like making them at the time, I might make more."

Dix is a professional. He sustains his modest lifestyle by selling his wares online, in galleries in Japan and select places outside the country, or directly to buyers. He's subject to the same market



forces noted above, namely, that chawan and guinomi have steady demand and also command higher prices. He necessarily uses premium kiln space for these.

"I do think about that and will have tea bowls on the front wall of the kiln facing the firebox. Guinomi can go anywhere because they're small and you can fit them around the larger stuff. But if I have a whisky cup that I really like, I'll place that in the front of the kiln and if it comes out nicely, it'll get a higher

price."

Dix is also a teacher. Workshops like these in Mendocino—more common before COVID—are an opportunity not only to make money but also share knowledge, produce work, and experiment.

"One thing that I teach a lot is how to loosen up. You want pieces where each one is unique, each one a little asymmetrical. How do you make a symmetrical pot asymmetrical without

it looking sloppy? I feel that when you get away from that round shape you get something that is ergonomically easier to use, more tactile, nicer to hold and admire. That's what I try to do with my own work."

Even with roughly twenty whisky cups going in each firing, not all of them will emerge attractive enough for a gallery shelf. With ceramic ware like this, their fate is cast to the fires of the kiln and the potter can only hope for success.



A kiln 'accident' that has become art

"I've had firings where more than half the pieces are duds," admits Dix. "Either the glaze didn't work or sometimes the pots shifted and stuck together. People who fire with wood have been described as gamblers."

It's much easier for artists to control the conditions in a gas or electric kiln. The results, however, are markedly different. It's not that one is necessarily superior to the other; that perception may depend on your taste. But wood-fired kilns can produce stunning results due to the ash melting at high temperatures, creating wild colors and effects. The firing time at Mendocino is abbreviated for practical reasons, but a "sweet spot" for firing, according to Dix, is about six or seven days. Some artists in Japan will fire for much longer.

Dix continues, "You have to cut all the wood just to get everything right—to

get a certain look for a certain pot out of the firing. There might be firings that don't reach temperatures hot enough to harden the clay and melt the ash glazes. Thankfully, that hasn't happened to me in many years."

He likes to describe firings as akin to climbing Mount Everest. Anybody can get to base camp. The last few hundred meters to the summit, however, is a different story. Dix notes that the last one-hundred degrees in a kiln firing can be a "nightmare" to attain when you're working with wood. Pieces that don't come out as desired get consigned to a "second shelf" for a discount. Some may look great, but be chipped. Maybe a few stuck together but need to be pried apart, leaving rough contact points. It is possible to refire pots again and again, and sometimes a few of them start to develop amazing color palettes through

the ash.

"If they are a complete dud, I smash them," says Dix.

Dix came to Japan as many long-time expat residents do: through roads meandering and unexpected. It's a place where many wanderers seem to finally find a sense of home. His interest in Japan was first piqued in college in the early 1980s. Wood-firing in America was taking off and he became interested in Japanese ceramics that had long relied on special kilns.

"I remember looking at a book of old Shigaraki jars (Shiga Prefecture) and being really intrigued by them. Why is this so powerful? Why does this broken piece with defects intrigue me more than something else that has in-

“Why does this broken piece with defects intrigue me more than something else that has incredible technique and balance?”

credible technique and balance?”

At Albion College in Michigan, Dix was able to try wood-firing before earning his BA in 1982 and landing an apprenticeship for several years at Terrestrial Forming Pottery, also in Michigan. Although Dix found inspiration from Japanese pottery, he acknowledges the outsized influence of Peter Callas and Peter Voulkos.

“Callas and Voulkos revolutionized clay work around the world, and Voulkos is a god even in Japan. He’s probably the only non-Japanese revered in Japan. He took clay from its utilitarian identity during the late 1950s and 60s, and did what Jackson Pollock did to painting with abstract expressionism.”

Callas, a native of New Jersey, had visited Japan in the late 1970s and observed their use of the *anagama* kiln, even helping to build one. It was a technology that migrated from China to Japan via Korea in the 5th century. It consists of a low door; the aforementioned firebox where wood is fed through the door and heat generated; the stacking floor behind that (often sloping upward) where ceramics are placed; and, in the back, the dampers, flue, and chimney. Callas left Japan and built the first *anagama* in North America in 1976.

Dix relates, “Callas met Voulkos at a show in New York and told him, ‘You know, your pots are good’—and Callas, being from New Jersey, could’ve been straight out of *The Sopranos*—‘but if you put them in my kiln, they’re going to be

great.”

Voulkos was working out of Berkeley, California at the time. He shipped his unfired pieces across America to Callas in New Jersey and liked the results of the firings. That was the beginning of the wood-firing tradition in America.

“Voulkos, America’s most famous ceramicist in my opinion, formed a relationship with Callas and started putting everything he made in Callas’ kiln. Those guys and their approach to work influenced me a lot, but I was always more on the functional side than the abstract side.”

In 1985 Dix moved to Greece where he took up an apprenticeship for six months. He had to crank out work at a relentless pace, but enjoyed being paid in cash to the tune of \$20 to \$30 for a half day’s work.

“I was renting out a house in Greece with some Europeans for \$15 a month. You could get a jug of fresh wine for a dollar. I was twenty-five, living the life.”

Dix moved from there to Jerusalem, where he worked as a potter in a kibbutz. He eventually moved on to work under a potter in the city who held a sale every week.

“I rented a table at the market and sold pots for the summer. I made enough money to travel through Asia for six months.”

Following those enriching few months, in 1987 Dix returned to the potter in Michigan he had previously apprenticed with and worked there until

1989. He decided to embark for Japan, specifically to do the type of clay work that had always inspired him. He hoped to attach himself with a Shigaraki or Bizen potter (the latter tradition based in Okayama Prefecture).

“I visited the Kyoto area, I had no money, and I didn’t know anybody, but I got a job teaching English almost the day after I got there. I did that for a couple of years before I finally got connected to a Bizen potter, Kanichi Mikami, and started working with him.”

Dix worked with Mikami in Tsuyama, Okayama from 1992 to 1994 while still holding onto his English-teaching gigs. Although he had settled comfortably in nearby Kobe, he started to contemplate a return to America. Then the Great Hanshin earthquake of January 17th, 1995 struck, killing over six-thousand people and destroying houses and infrastructure throughout Kobe. His own home had to be razed.

The day before that fateful event, Dix had met David Jack and Sachiko Matsunaga, a dynamic couple who were active in the Kansai (greater Osaka) area and who operated a popular, regional magazine for the expat community. They had shared with him their idea of building a small arts and education facility on a piece of land they owned out in the countryside, but were fuzzy on the specifics. They wanted ideas. Dix, who was uncertain about his future direction, had an epiphany.

In neither his interview for this



Above and right page: scenes from Fieldwork Japan (photos care of Dix)

magazine, nor his presentation to his students in Mendocino—nor even in his online writings—does Dix ever explicitly tie the earthquake to his decision to stay and work with the couple, but the two events appear to be clearly connected in his mind, and not simply because of their proximity in time. The quake, it seems, altered his perspective, as it must have for everyone that experienced it as violently as he did.

Over the next few months, he kept in touch with the couple and in the spring of 1995, they broke ground on a kiln. Through their support, the property in Ōgami became Fieldwork Japan, home to a couple of studios, a kitchen and dining area, a small dorm, a teahouse, and two kilns. They stipulated that this new learning facility would be operated by individuals from the international community, but be a space where such residents could work with the Japanese toward common goals.

Thanks to the couple's vision and generosity, Dix would no longer be a wanderer. He would become an educator and potter in Japan, working from that facility for the next few decades, up to the present.

It's the last day of the workshop and students are giddy about pulling all of their pieces from the two kilns. The previous day's activities included a visit to two other kilns operated by potters tucked away in the redwoods nearby, followed by an evening pizza party—naturally with pizzas cooked in a wood-fired oven. Drinks? Oh yes, there were drinks. But any



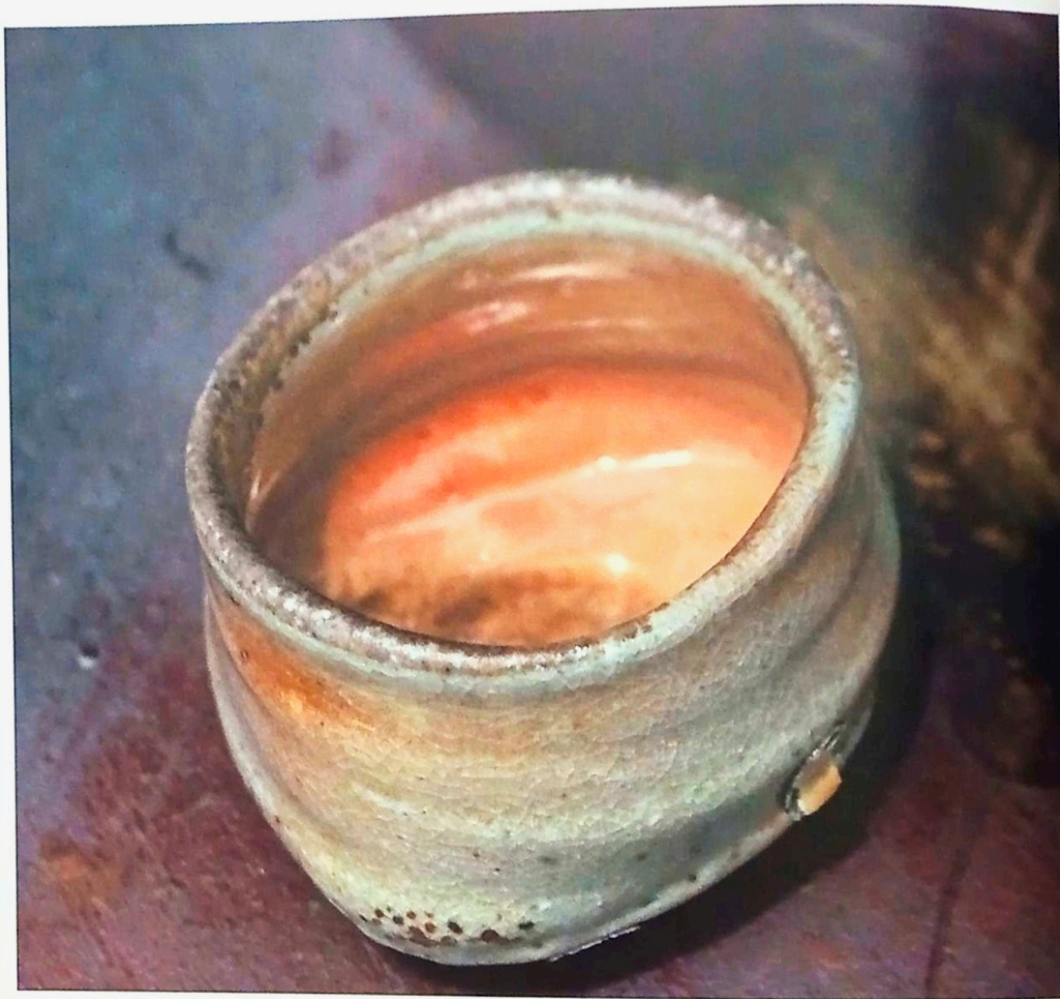
grogginess quickly transitions to excitement in the kiln area.

The ceramics in the kilns, even with the flames having died and the doors having been opened, are still hot. Dix and staff of the Mendocino Arts Center wear gloves to delicately remove all the work. Students line up and the pieces are passed from hand to hand in a kind of ceremony so each person can admire them.

Unloading the kiln takes considerable time and each piece is eventually placed on the tables for students to further admire and critique. A few pieces are stuck together, having shifted in the kiln from the flames. Those are placed in water with the hope that they will easily come apart. Otherwise, they will have to be pried apart leaving blemishes or, in some cases, left as is, like an unusual work of fused art.

It's obvious which pieces belong to Dix. These are experienced students, some of whom have created gallery-worthy work, so it's not as if the quality of Dix's pieces necessarily exceeds everyone else's exponentially (though most, if not all, would probably have agreed that his work emerged with superior craftsmanship). It's more that Dix has a distinct style that embraces its Japanese influences and yet has its own idiosyncrasies.

Dix's work is traditional in that it hews closely to Japanese aesthetics but is also eclectic as a whole because he doesn't anchor himself solely in any established style. In Japan, an array of relatively distinct pottery traditions developed in various regions throughout the country. The characteristics of the styles are the result of a complex matrix of variables from type of clay and glazes used to assumptions about shape and usage. This article has mentioned such styles as Shigaraki and Bizen, two of the most famous, but there are many others that Dix draws from (Shino, Iga, etc.). His body of work thus has a wide and quite unusual range of character, though that may be cause for frowning among some traditionalists in Japan.



Unstuck whisky cup (see page 109); notice the contact point at bottom right of cup

When asked about the Japanese reception of his work, he speaks at length, "It's mostly positive. To gain full acceptance, you'd have to 'go native', wear kimono, et cetera. I like doing the tea ceremony, for example, but I don't necessarily want to study it. And I've never completely adhered to the Japanese way of making pots. Traditionally, you go to a teacher—it might be your father—and you do the same thing they did. And when you get to be about sixty or seventy, you can start tweaking it a little to be your own. Having been raised in the States and having attended art school there, I like creativity and doing many different things."

Japanese potters don't typically hold workshops, either, unless they are teachers at a school. For Dix, workshops like these in Mendocino are important because he sees it as an opportunity to share with people.

"Wood firing is a communal activity," concludes Dix.

For many, so is enjoying alcohol—that much was evident during the 'festive' evenings at the art center. It's especially pleasing when you're drinking from wood-fired ceramics because of their visual and tactile appeal. You can appreciate art and alcohol in the same moment, and perhaps the two enhance each other. For those that enjoy whisky, Dix is enabling that pairing with each laborious, uncertain, but rewarding firing. ●



Some pieces, by fate of fire and kiln, are meant to be

